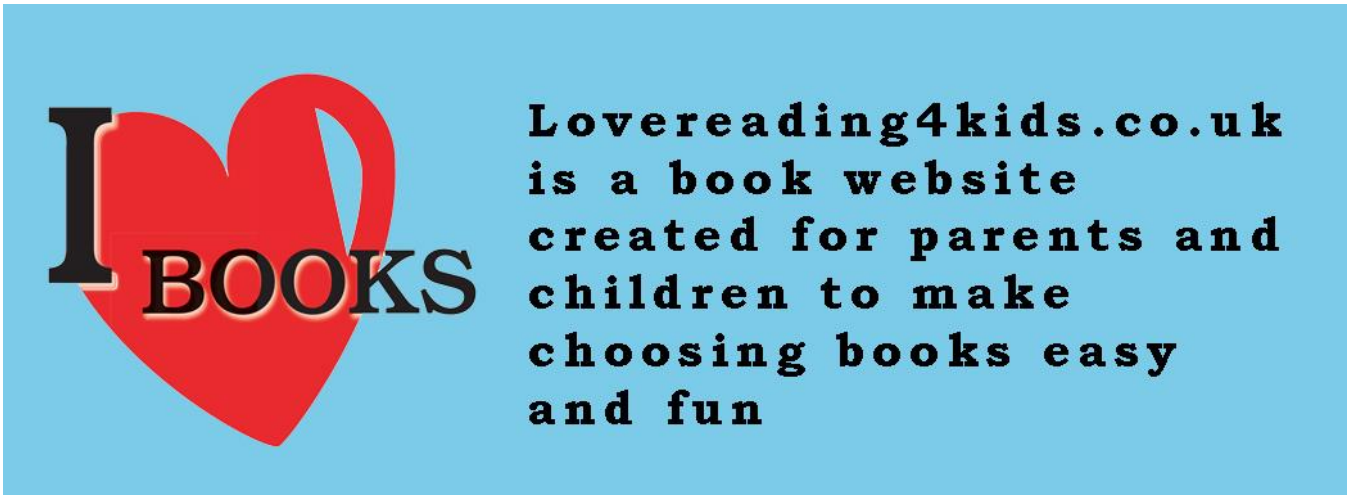



Opening extract from

# Beck

Written by

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## 1.1
## AN ACCIDENTAL CHILD

HIS MOTHER MET his father in Liverpool on a frigid night in 1907. She was not a prostitute but in times of need, short of other forms of employment, she would sell herself to men. She never spent the proceeds frivolously. Every last farthing of the five shillings she charged would be spent on rent and on food for her family, which consisted of her frail parents, who were addicted to patent medicines, and an older brother who was wrong in the head. Thus she made financial expiation for her sin. Spiritual expiation took the form of full and frank confession through the grille of a curtained box in Saint Ignatius, a church distant from her neighbourhood. She was a devout Catholic and performed her penances scrupulously. She would promise to sin no more, and meant it every time. Her name was Anne Beck.

His father happened to be standing outside a pub when Anne happened to be passing on her way home. Twenty minutes earlier she had been sacked from her job

as a chambermaid at the Imperial Hotel for slapping the undermanager who was groping her in the linen room. Beck's father was on the street because the pub operated a colour bar, and he was African, from a country called in those days the Gold Coast. The landlord had refused to serve him. This often happened when his ship docked in England, and he accepted it more or less philosophically.

His white shipmates had protested but instead of moving on had brought him a pint and a baked potato to enjoy with his magazine serial in the drizzle. He'd perched the pint on the pub's window ledge, gripping the pulpy pages of his ha'penny dreadfuller in one hand while he gingerly conveyed the hot crumbly flesh of the potato to his mouth with the other. That's when Anne came by.

He was handsome and she was impressed that he could read. She was also hungry.

"Wan' some?" Smiling at her, showing his beautiful teeth, looking infinitely sad. Even sadder than she.

Anne shared his potato and his beer while he haltingly read her the adventures of Sexton Blake, and then she took him home. She was perfectly honest with him, telling him that it would cost money. He showed her the various coins he had in his pockets and she picked out British ones that added up to more or less five bob. She led him up the backs, lifting her skirt and alerting him to dog mess. They entered her house by the scullery door. Inside, it was quiet because her parents had passed out downstairs and her brother was locked in his room. She lit a bit of candle she found next to

the sink and took him up to her room, where, despite her rudimentary precautions, he got her pregnant.

She never knew his name. Or, rather, never mastered the trick of pronouncing it in the short time she knew him. His ship departed for Belfast the following day.

A month before Beck's eleventh birthday, his great-grandparents and his mother and his daft kindly uncle all died in the flu epidemic. Anne was the last to go.

Just before the fever stilled her heart she tightened her clasp on the boy's hand and whispered, "There's three pound and seven shillin' put away. It's in…"

He was an odd-looking kid with his mother's green-flecked hazel eyes and a deep shade of his father's colouring and hair that stuck out all ways. He was taken to the Catholic orphanage run by the methodically cruel Sisters of Mercy. The shame of his mixed race meant that he was also victimized by the other orphans. He lived in that dire and loveless establishment for three and a half years; at the end of that time he had become a hard little bastard who had learned to cry silently and dry-eyed.

Christian names were not used in the orphanage and eventually Beck forgot that he had one.

## 1.2
## THE LEAVING OF LIVERPOOL

On a chill March morning in 1922, twelve of the boys, Beck among them, were led to the wash house where they had their hair cut off by Sister Francis Xavier, assisted by Mr Joyce, the caretaker. Then they were made to strip naked and wash themselves at the long zinc trough, paying particular attention to their private parts. Still naked, and shivering, they were next intimately examined by a man who wore a white coat over his suit. The press of his stethoscope was like the kiss of a cold-water fish.

The boys assumed that these humiliations were a punishment for some as yet undisclosed sin; so they were surprised when they were then led to the laundry and issued with sets of clothes far less wretched than those they had discarded, and boots that were almost new. Even more surprisingly, they were then taken, in their new finery, to the refectory and given a mug of beef tea and a hunk of bread apiece, which they eagerly and anxiously consumed

with bald heads lowered. Twelve heads pale as suet puddings, one brown as a potato.

While they were chewing and slurping, Sister Thomas Aquinas came into the room with a clergyman they had never seen before. He had a face the colour of canned meat separated from his black suit by a white dog collar that looked as hard and cold as the rim of a pisspot. He spoke to the boys at some length. Beck understood few of the words used. He had a vague idea what "adventure" and "opportunity" meant, but had no idea what "Canada" was.

At the end of his speech, the stranger ordered the boys to close their eyes and clasp their hands together. He recited a prayer. The boys said "Amen" into their empty cups.

The man regarded them for a long moment and said, "I envy you. Sincerely. Good luck, and may God be your guide."

At a gesture from Sister Thomas the boys stood. Very soon afterwards – too soon for goodbyes to friends, if they had any – the eleven Chosen Ones filed through the orphanage gates onto the street where, astonishingly, a green and black motor coach stood awaiting them. It trembled to the stumbling thump of its engine. The driver, a stout little man in a long brown coat, was loading kitbags into the boot. When he was done, he opened the coach's door, officiously, and the boys climbed in, followed by Sister Thomas. Beck had never before been in a vehicle of any kind. He sat near the front gripping his seat against the noise and grinding

rattle of the engine and watched with fascination the way the driver worked the wheel, the levers, the pedals.

After a short journey that took the boys beyond the perimeter of familiar territory, the coach stopped at a building very similar to the one they had just left. It was the Christian Brotherhood Home for Boys, although no sign confessed the fact. Eight more boys with shaven heads boarded the coach, silently. One took the seat alongside Beck's. He smelled of fear and camphor mothballs and sat staring straight ahead with his hands knotted on his crotch. A priest followed the boys in and sat down next to Sister Thomas, who greeted him with a stiff little nod.

The coach set off again and after a mysterious passage of time joined the jerking melee of mechanical, animal and human traffic that flowed and counterflowed alongside the River Mersey. The bald boys stared aghast from the coach's windows at a slow parade of massive buildings the colour of congealed blood. In the gaps between them, stone-rimmed lakes crammed with ships, some masted, some funnelled, webbed together with ropes. Rust-red cranes swivelled, their little cabins farting smoke. Man-high coils of chain. Carts and wheelbarrows and people. People everywhere.

Beck, uncomprehending, understood that this must always have been so, that this was normal, that this was what had been going on while he'd been slummed, bullied, confined. His heart, like his clothes and boots, felt too big for him. For most of the journey, he'd been gripping a metal

thing next to a window of the coach. Now he realized that it was a latch that might allow the window to be opened. So he tried it and admitted a filthy spectrum of smells: dung, coal smoke, tar, brewery malt, tidal mud, fried fish, putrescent garbage.

"Boy! You, boy! Darkie!"

Beck looked back at the irate priest. "Yeah, Father?"

"Shut that fecking window, for the love of God!"

A huge building pale as early sunlight passed by and then there was the low expanse of the river itself, shimmering behind the dark filigree of cranes, glittering below a frown of cloud.

Soon after, they arrived at Husskinson Dock. The driver stilled the engine, used both hands to haul the brake up, and opened the door. At the priest's impatient urging, the children disembarked. While the driver unloaded the kitbags the boys clustered between two enormous metal bollards and gawped up at the vast ship that loomed above them.

The priest stood aside and lit a cigarette. The ship's towering black flank was capped by a curving white superstructure full of small rectangular windows. Chains stretched landwards from its nostrils. Halfway along the quay, a group of richly dressed women and men looked up at a car, a Rolls-Royce, being gently hoisted by a crane towards the upper deck.

It was not, of course, their ship. A uniformed man with a clipboard bustled along the dock and spoke to the priest.

Then he approached the boys and said, "Foller me, if you please, lads. Pick up your bags. Any one'll do."

He marched them along the pitted flagstones until they came to a hard-used vessel called the *Duke of Argyll* tethered to the dockside by thick hairy ropes. Jocular cursing stevedores were ushering complaining sheep into a wide door at its stern. A ribbed and roped gangway led up to a smaller aperture amidships. At the foot of it, Sister Thomas led the boys in a recitation of the Lord's Prayer. At the words "those who trespass against us" (which Beck could never say without slurping), a hard rain began to fall.

"Amen."

Then the nun and the priest scuttled off, the nun raising her skirts clear of splash. Baffled and alarmed, some of the boys made as if to follow, but the clipboard man spread his arms to block their way.

"No, no, boys. Here. This way." He shepherded them onto the gangway. "Up we go. Single file, please. Hold the rope. That's it."

They all survived the slippery swaying ascent and were led along a metal colonnade, its white uprights lumpy with rust blisters, up a flight of narrow metal steps, across an oil-stained wooden deck, down two more flights of steps and through a steel door two inches thick. They found themselves in a penned-off and dimly lit section of the steerage deck. The panicky bleating of sheep was audible through the bulkhead. The space was minimally furnished with lockers and narrow high-sided iron bunks bolted to the

floor. On and around these beds another forty or so bald shivering boys were clustered.

For a moment, Beck was reassured; apart from the lowness of the ceiling, he might have been back in the orphanage dormitory. The clipboard man told them, more or less kindly, to make themselves comfortable, and that they would be fed and watered in due course.

Beck assumed they had been brought to live here in this unconventional heaving dormitory, perhaps because their previous accommodation was needed by a new flood of the parentless or unwanted. He was thrilled by the possibility of escaping into the nearby mad busy flux he had glimpsed from the motor coach's window. And by the absence of nuns. He was fairly sure that he could find his way back to the ramp and freedom. He chucked his kitbag onto the nearest cot, sat and waited for what he thought was the right amount of time, and went to the massive door. It was locked.

"Shit," he said, kicking the steel. *"Shit!"*

And when, two hours later, a mournful horn sounded and the room shuddered and an awful sense of motion transmitted itself through the unimaginable architecture of the ship, his cries of dismay blended with those of the other cold and hungry boys and the neighbouring sheep. By the time the formidable door was opened from the outside and a voice summoned the children to supper, the tilting floor was slick with vomit.

## 1.3
## THE LIFE OF THE WORLD TO COME

BECK STOOD CONFUSED and astonished by the huge discrepancy between the solidity beneath his feet and the vast liquidity of everything else. The ship stood weirdly still upon a limitless range of green-grey hills of sea that slipped and bellied in all directions, leaving white skeins of foam in their valleys. Valleys slowly swelled into new hills to have their crests whipped by the wind into flying gobbets of spume. The sky was a grey parade ground across which stately formations of plumed clouds marched back towards Europe and home.

He stood in a loose crescent of boys alongside those members of the ship's crew who could be spared for the occasion. By peering over the shoulder of the boy in front of him Beck could see that a sort of trough, a chute made of polished planks, had been angled down from the deck towards the restless water far below. It swayed slightly, upsetting his stomach. He looked away from it, to his right,

and studied the man he now knew to be the captain of the *Duke of Argyll*, a man with a fancy jacket and cap, slightly soiled trousers and a red beard like a rusty chisel. He had a small black book and a scrap of paper in his hand and was conferring with a younger officer, Mr Mitchell, a man with a kind face.

The captain nodded impatiently and made corrections on the scrap of paper with a stub of pencil.

"So, it's *James* Riley and *Joseph* McAvoy. Not vice versa. Very well. Not that they'd give a damn now. Let's get on with it, shall we?"

Jimmy Riley and Joe McAvoy lay on the deck close to the chute. They were sewn into canvas sacks with their cold feet resting on lumps of pig iron.

The captain opened his book and began to read. "'Man that is born of a woman hath but a short time to live…'"

That's for damn sure, Mitchell thought. Jimmy had been eight, little Joe seven. They'd died, stewed in their thin faeces, quarantined in a spare cabin in the crew's quarters. Keech, the steward, had opened the door yesterday morning and recoiled from the stench. The boys had died holding hands. Mitchell's imagination refused to picture how and when that clasp had been formed, declined the question of which of them had died first and which of them had died alone. Quite properly fearing the spread of contagion, Captain Rennick had ordered the bedding to be burned in the ship's boiler along with the victims' belongings. The death cabin and the boys' quarters had been purged with

Lysol. In a few moments, there would be no material evidence that these two boys had ever existed.

Mitchell tracked his gaze over the shorn children. They looked, as usual, numb and lost but none showed obvious signs of illness. The half-caste boy, Beck, met his eyes and Mitchell offered him a small encouraging smile.

"'O holy and most merciful Saviour, thou most worthy Judge eternal, suffer us not, at our last hour, for any pains of death, to fall from thee.'"

Rennick paused, riffling through the pages of his prayer book. He glanced at his watch, then at the two seamen standing at the head of the chute. They stooped and lifted the limp bundle that was Jimmy or possibly Joe onto the boards and held it there. Beck, at last, understood what was going to happen. He sucked back a swear word. His legs went unsteady, as if the deck had lurched.

"'Forasmuch as it hath pleased Almighty God of his great mercy to take unto himself the souls of our dear brothers, James Riley and Joseph McAvoy, here departed; we therefore commit their bodies to the deep…'"

Here Rennick nodded without taking his eyes from the page. The men at the chute released their grip. With a slight rasp and remarkable swiftness, the bagged and weighted boy slithered down and away and was gone. No splash was heard, perhaps because the sound was lost among the susurration of gasps and faint cries from the congregation of children.

"'…to be turned into corruption, looking for the

resurrection of the body, when the sea shall give up her dead, and the life of the world to come…'"

The second corpse was now hoisted onto the chute. It offered some slight resistance; the mariners had to give it a little heave to speed its plunge into eternity.

Beck felt the press of something hard against his left arm. It was the head of the small boy beside him. He eased his arm free and tucked the boy's head into his armpit, cupping the wet chin in his hand like a football.

Rennick came to the end of his reading. He and his crew removed their caps and bowed their heads. The *Argyll*'s horn emitted a long, bovine moan. The stiff breeze keened and rattled through the halyards.

"Let us pray. 'Our Father, which art in heaven…'"

The words choked in Beck's throat long before the tricky bit about trespasses. A voice in his head said, *Yer don' fookin deserve this*, but he wasn't sure to whom it spoke.

## 1.4
## CHOCOLAT

FOUR DAYS LATER, after a slow progress down the fog-shrouded St Lawrence, the ship's horn sounding its funereal bellow every few minutes, the *Duke of Argyll* docked in Montreal. Three quarters of an hour after the ship's rumbling and nudging had ceased, Mr Mitchell opened the door to the boys' quarters and stepped inside, smiling. The children were, as instructed, fully dressed, wearing hats and overcoats, sitting on their bunks with their kitbags beside them.

"Here we are, then, lads. Canada! A new life! And fresh air. You'll be glad of that, I dare say. Eh? So let's line up for disembarkation. Single file. Let's be having you. That's it."

By now the boys' heads had started to regain their hair. Beck's pate was speckled by what might have been a sooty lichen. Mitchell resisted the momentary desire to run his hand over it; instead, he produced a purse from his pocket. Moving down the queue, he gave each little immigrant a silver Canadian dime.

"Something for a rainy day, eh? Keep it somewhere safe. Not in a pocket with a hole in it, mind."

Beck examined his coin. On one side there was a bearded man; he assumed it was Captain Rennick. On the other side, a leaf. After a moment's thought, he bent and shoved it into his sock, where it nestled below his ankle bone and against the leather of his boot. None of the boys thanked Mitchell, who was unsurprised; he knew they had little experience of generosity and scant practice at gratitude.

"Right then, lads. Here we go. Follow me and stay together. We'll get you sorted as soon as we're ashore."

From the top of the passenger gangway, Beck looked down at the group of adults who were clearly waiting to greet them. The women all wore hats like soft upended basins, long dark coats and facial expressions suggesting that greeting orphans was not something they took much pleasure in. The two men wore grey suits, black hats and clerical collars. Descending, Beck saw that all six pairs of eyes turned their aim at him. His stomach clenched. He farted, damply.

Mitchell shepherded the boys into a cluster on the jetty then shook hands with the reception committee. He took a sheet of paper from his pocket and unfolded it. Beck heard him speak the names of dead Jimmy and Joey. The grown-ups nodded, solemnly. The younger of the two priests clasped his hands together and lowered his head. Mitchell took a pencil from his breast pocket and spoke again. The

grown-ups gathered more closely around him.

This was Canada, then, Beck thought. It was not that different from Liverpool. It was as if the ship had gone full circle. A colourless sky. The same smells: smoke, tar, rot, salt, fish, oil. The same sounds: gulls croaking, beasts groaning, men shouting, water slupping, wind grieving its way through webs of rope.

He sat, *fook this*, on his kitbag. The coin in his sock felt warmer than his skin. He must have dozed, because the next thing was that he was looking up at the faces of the two priests and Mr Mitchell's hand was on his head.

"And this sleepyhead is Beck. He's a grand lad, all things considered."

The clerics glanced at each other. The older one pulled the corners of his mouth down in a humorous grimace and rolled his eyes. The younger one said, "Welcome to Canada, Beck. I'm Brother Duncan and this is Brother John. We'll be looking after you the while."

Braemar, the Christian Brotherhood's receiving home on Rue Berri, was the biggest house Beck had ever seen. He had never seen a house with trees around it. Houses and trees, according to his understanding of things, had no business with each other. Where there was one, there wasn't the other. But Braemar had a huge tree – a great tower spreading dark green arms – between it and the street. And a row of wispy, witchy trees, misted with pale green leaves, beside it. And bushes like huge green boulders in front of

it. The house was (although Beck's imagination lacked the language for such a comparison) like an elephant trying to hide in, or feed on, shadows. It frightened him. He didn't want to climb the short flight of steps up to its doors of dark glass. But he did because no other option was available.

The doors opened onto a porch with stained-glass side windows that drenched the drab little newcomers in multi-coloured light. Brother John unlocked an inner door and ushered the boys into a dim, green-carpeted hall. Ahead of them, a wide staircase uncoiled its banister up into darkness. From high on the wall to the left, a carved Christ loomed down from his cross. To the right, a weeping but smiling Blessed Virgin gazed up at the top of the elaborate frame that contained her. Her tears were so realistic that Beck thought they would be wet to his touch, if he were tall enough to reach them.

To the right of the staircase, a passageway receded into an undefined distance. Some way along it, a door opened and another priest emerged. He leaned against the frame of the door and folded his arms. His hair, which was white, was at odds with his face, which was youthful. His eyes were a little too large for his face and were moist and slightly elongated. Combined with his lack of chin, they gave him the appearance of a kindly rabbit. And they focused on Beck.

He said, "Well, Brother Duncan, what have we here?"

"Allow me to introduce, Brother Robert, the new recipients of our grace. They are, in ascending order of height,

though not necessarily age, Patrick Rice, Joseph Kennedy, Frederick Treacher, William Brownlow and Beck."

"Beck? Has he no Christian name?"

"He was, apparently, baptized in the name of Ignatius, but he answers only to 'Beck'."

Sullen, talked about, Beck thought he heard a child crying from another room. The priest called Brother Robert moved into the hall, closing the door behind him. The crying stopped.

"Well, boys, welcome to Braemar. We've never met, of course, but I already know two things about you. The first is that you are wondering where in the name of God you are. What kind of place this is. The second is that you have endured a long journey and are tired and hungry. Am I right?"

The ensuing silence was gravid. Beck broke its waters.

"Yeah. I'm bloody starvin."

Brother John said, "Beck! In this house we don't—"

But Brother Robert, smiling, silenced his colleague by raising his hand. Still smiling, he went to a dark little table at the foot of the crucified Christ and picked up a small brass bell. He jangled it, and everything changed. Overhead, footsteps gathered like muffled thunder. A dozen boys descended and collided at the foot of the stairs. They paused briefly to consider the newcomers then, cowed by the lifted eyebrows of Brother Robert, filed down the gloomy passage that suddenly ended in a blaze of light into which they jostled and disappeared.

"Time for tea," Brother Robert said. "Hang your coats up. Leave your bags. We'll settle you later."

The Braemar kitchen, Beck thought, was a sort of miracle. It was enormous. And warm. And smelled breadily wonderful. He found himself standing close to one end of a long table with chairs and plates and mugs ranged down its length. On the table, at intervals, there were loaves, platters of sliced cheese and glass dishes of purple jam. The boys from upstairs stood silently either side of the table. Looking up, Beck saw that a long wooden rack was suspended from the ceiling; from it, laundered shirts stretched their arms down towards the feast like hungering ghosts.

A stove was built into a sort of brick cavern at the far end of the room; on it, a fat black kettle pouted steam. A fourth priest – stout, with stubble-shadowed jowls – lifted it from the heat and emptied it into a half-gallon teapot. He turned to glance at the new arrivals; his eyed lingered on Beck.

"Right then, you newcomers," he said. "Find yourselves a place. No, no! Don't sit. Stand, like the others. As soon as Brother Robert comes we'll be saying a grace. Then you can get stuck in."

Beck slid a look at the boy beside him. Billy's throat was working like mad, swallowing saliva. So much food. And so close at hand.

The door opened and Brother Robert entered. His hand rested on the fair and fuzzy head of a pale child whose eyes

were pinkish and swollen. The priest pushed him forward, gently.

"Go to your place, Alfred, my dear. There's a good boy."

Alfred went to the chair opposite Beck's. He kept his eyes lowered. He snuffled, once.

Brothers Robert, John and Duncan took up position in front of the tall dresser that occupied the space between the two windows.

Brother Robert said, "If you would do the honours, Brother Michaelis?"

The jowly priest stood at the head of the table. He waited until the hungry boys put their hands together and lowered their heads. Then, at some length, he thanked God for the gifts hereupon this table.

"Amen," the boys raggedly chorused.

"Be seated."

Beck sat quick as a rat. He'd assessed the bread, counted the cheese slices, estimated the jam by spoonfuls per head. He'd lived on charity long enough to know the rules: eat fast, get most, remember the taste later. Don't be the first to grab, though. They like to punish you for that. The punishment for hunger is hunger. He watched the others. Little Pat Rice leaned towards the food as though he could live on the smell of it alone, but no one else moved. No one spoke. Vital moments passed.

Beck thought, What the fook now?

Brother Michaelis brought the huge teapot to the table and set it down. "Now then," he said, tracking his smile

around the table, "who'll be mother? How about you, Victor? You've the good strong arms for the job."

Victor was an older and remarkably ugly boy. His hair was bristles on a knackered broom. He lacked front teeth and his arms were too long for his sleeves. His wrists could have been knees on a normal person.

He said, "Aw, Farver. No' me agin. I done it—"

*"Victor!"* Brother Robert cracked the name like a whip. Then smiled.

The boy called Victor stood up and hefted the teapot. He carried it first over to the dresser where he filled the priests' cups. His arms trembled with the effort of not sloshing the saucers. Then he went along the table, muttering abuse under his breath while he poured. Meanwhile Brother Michaelis, using the longest knife Beck had ever seen, very swiftly cut the loaves into slices. To Beck's expert eye, the slices were of exactly the same thickness.

At last these tedious rituals were over. Eighteen pairs of hands lunged.

Brother Michaelis joined his colleagues. He sipped his tea then raised his comedic eyebrows.

"Well now," he murmured, with a small nod in Beck's direction, "*un petit chocolat*, eh? A first, I think?"

## 1.5
## HYGIENIC BOYS

BECK AND JOE and Pat and Fred and Billy followed Brother Robert up the soft-carpeted stairs.

"So, boys, are you well fed? Good. You'll have had a hard journey. I know, because I've done it myself a few times now. Back and forth to the old country. You'll be wanting to get out of those clothes, too. Because, to be quite frank, you smell like a pack of polecats."

At the landing he paused, backlit by ruddy light from the tall window, and turned to look down at them.

"Over the years, hundreds of boys have passed through this house. I cannot swear that all have departed pure in spirit, but all have departed clean in body. Here at Braemar, we do insist on producing a *hygienic* boy. Come."

The landing gave onto a corridor, closed doors on either side. One, open, facing them at the far end, spilling light.

It was a large room unlike any that Beck had seen. Its main features were warmth and an enormous roll-top

bathtub resting on four iron paws. At one end of this phenomenon a brass pillar grew from the floor culminating in a pair of fat taps that spewed water. Wisps of steam wreathed the oil lamp standing on the windowsill. The window was tall and blade-shaped, like in a church, and shuttered. Once-white towels hung from hooks. On the tiled floor, a rug with a squirming pattern of reds and browns and muted blues. Just inside the door and below the window, two armchairs upholstered like the rug. A smell in the room that was both sweet and as stale as snuffed candles. Brother John, now in shirtsleeves and a white apron, leaned over the bath, dabbling his fingers in the water. He turned off the taps and straightened when the boys came in.

"Right, young sirs. You've a treat in store. So, clothes off." He lifted the lid from a zinc tub. "Put everything in here."

Brother Robert sat in one of the armchairs and lit a cigarette. The boys stood, unmoving, uncertain.

"Sharpish, now," Brother John said. "The water's cooling. Don't be shy. You've nothing to show that we've not seen before. Isn't that so, Brother Robert?"

From behind his veil of mist and smoke the kindly rabbit said, "I should be most surprised if they had."

The boys undressed. Little Pat fumbled it and, sighing theatrically, Brother John stooped to help him with the buttons. Naked, Beck and Billy covered their genitals with their hands. Pat put his thumb in his mouth. A silent stillness in the steamy room while the priests perused the children.

Then Brother John said, quietly, "Good. Into the bath then."

Beck said, "Aller us together?"

Brother Robert chuckled. "Oh, there's plenty of room. This is the leviathan of baths. We've known it swallow ten boys at a go, never mind five. Have we not, Brother John?"

"Indeed we have. At a squeeze."

The bath was so high-sided that Pat needed a helping hand to get in. None of the boys had previously experienced immersion in warm water. Billy sat at the curved end of the bath with his gob open and his eyes shut like a dreamer, clutching the sides. Fred and Joe stayed on their knees, trying not to get wet. Beck sat below the taps, enrapt, watching his submerged body become strange, feeling the heat soak into him. Pat howled when the water rose to his thin neck, and struggled upright. Beck yanked him back down.

"Is aw right, Pat. Hush. Yer'll never drown in here."

Brother John beamed down at them, his face flushed pink above the swell of his apron, an ingot of yellow soap in his hand.

"Isn't that nice? You just enjoy it. A little taste of heaven, is a hot bath. Now, I'm going to lather your heads. Keep your eyes shut while I'm about it, or they'll sting like the devil. I'll start with you, *Chocolat*."

Beck felt a drench of hot water and the hard rub of the soap on his scalp, then the priest's fingers working over his head like a blind man's investigation. He resisted the deliciousness of it, clamped his eyes tight against the sudden

burning memory of his mother. Then a great slosh of water and he was awake again, eyes burning, gasping.

Brother John moved on to Pat, who sobbed and spat throughout the whole business. Billy sat upright with his face tucked tight as a cat's arse while Brother John did him. Beck thought that was the end of it, but it wasn't.

Brother John dropped a threadbare face flannel onto each boy. "Now wash. Tip to toe and everywhere in between. Face and in the ears. Don't forget your downstairs bits, fore and aft. Then legs and feet and between the toes. Off you go."

He went to a tall black cupboard and withdrew from it a bottle of whisky and two glasses. He poured Brother Robert a measure and then another for himself which he took to the other chair and settled himself. Brother Robert lit another cigarette without taking his eyes from the boys in the bath.

Beck had no words for what he felt. *Delight* might have been one of them, but he'd never had occasion to need it or know it. *Trepidation,* another. Sister Francesca, that ugly bitch, had many times told him that he was going to get into hot water. But he never had been until now. He squeezed the flannel on his shoulders and felt the lovely trickles of heat go down his back. He worked the flannel over himself. He pushed his toes into Pat's slatty little ribs and laughed when Pat flinched and sputtered.

"Enjoying yourself, *Chocolat*? Beck?"

He looked through the steam at the smiling priest. "Yeah. I'm well enough, ta."

"Excellent. Now, I want you all to sit and soak while you listen to what I'm going to tell you. You may not understand everything I say, but I want you to remember it because you will understand when you are older." Brother Robert paused to sip whisky and draw on his cigarette.

"You are now at the point at which your old lives end and your new lives begin. This bath is the baptism that marks that change. It washes away the shame and hardship that has been the story of your lives so far. You will leave this house cleansed, ready to start afresh. From here, you will be sent to new homes. You will become members of families. Families who will care for you, adopt you as their sons. Most will be farmers who need your help. Yes, your *help*. I know that you are city boys who wouldn't know one end of a plough from the other. But you will learn. You will learn skills; you will become men who will shape the destiny of this young and magnificent country."

Brother Robert rested his cigarette in the cut-glass ashtray on the arm of his chair while he wiped a bead of sweat from his forehead. "I cannot say exactly when you will leave us to embark on these great adventures. You may be with us for weeks or months. But here is the important thing. While you are with us, you must forget the past. You will not be returning to that misery. And you must not worry about the future, even though it might frighten you. You have had the great good fortune to find yourselves, for now, in a place of safety. I and my fellow brothers are inspired by the words of Our Lord Jesus Christ, who said, 'Suffer the little children to

come unto me'. Our duty is to love boys such as yourselves. My years of service have taught me that you are unlikely to know what love is and ignorant of the forms it might take. So let us teach you, just as we feed and care for you. And when you leave here, take the experience of love with you. Keep it in a secret place in your hearts, just as you have kept Mister Mitchell's dimes concealed in your clothes."

*Fook,* Beck thought, and turned to look at the metal bin.

Brother John laughed. "Don't worry, *Chocolat*. We're not going to take your hidden treasure from you. It'll be in your pocket when you leave. Now then, all good things come to an end, so out you get. There are other boys waiting on their bath."

He handed them each a towel then went to the black cupboard from which he took five folded white nightshirts. Dry, more or less, the boys put them on. Pat's reached to the floor. Billy's, Fred's and Joe's came to their ankles. Beck's stopped just below his knees.

"You have become angels," Brother Robert said, studying them. "Now, down to the kitchen with you for hot milk. Then bed. One of us will come to your rooms to supervise your prayers."

At the doorway Beck turned. Brother Robert had removed his jacket and was unfastening his clerical collar. "Go," he said.

Later, Beck and Billy were taken to a bedroom on the second floor. There were four beds; the other two were

occupied by ugly Victor and a younger boy.

When prayers were over and Brother Duncan had left, when his footfalls had retreated downstairs, Beck said, "Aw right here, lads, then, is it? Yer get a feed like that every day an' that? We landed on our feet, or what?"

Silence. The skylight threw a pale blue rhomboid onto the younger boy's bed.

"Lads?"

Without lifting his head Victor said, "I'm outta here tomorrer."

"Yeah? Where' yer goin?"

"Don' know, don' care. Fuck'm."

"Wha's that serposed to mean?"

Beck was startled when Victor sat suddenly upright.

"Wos yer name, darkie? Beck, ennit? Right. Aw right. Lissen. All yer need to know is this. Do wharever they want yer to do. Cos if yer don', they take yer down to the cellar. An' yer don' wanna go down there. Tha's right, ennit, Stevie?"

The boy in the moon-splashed bed silently pulled his blanket over his face.

"Yeah," Victor said and dumped his improbable head back onto his pillow.

"No one's takin me nowheres I don' wanna go," Beck said.

Victor's laugh was short and without mirth.